

[Bernice]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff [1?]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER FRANK BYRD

ADDRESS 224 West 135th. St. NYC

DATE October 4, 1938

SUBJECT HARLEM HOUSE-RENT PARTIES: (#3)BERNICE

1. Date and time of interview October 2, 1938
2. Place of interview Informant lives in an apartment on 141st St. near Lenox Avenue (Harlem)
3. Name and address of informant Bernice Informant gave the interview on condition that her present address and last name be omitted from story
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

NOTE: The following is a statement made to the writer by informant—a West Indian Negress who came to this country when she was a girl of high-school age. Her story tells of her marriage to an American Negro who deserted her two years after their marriage in 1928. From that time on she earned her living, first as a part-time domestic worker, later as a promoter of “rent parties” and owner of a “buffet flat” (pleasure house).

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER FRANK BYRD

ADDRESS 224 West 135th. St. NYC

DATE October 4, 1938

SUBJECT HARLEM HOUSE-RENT PARTIES: (#3)BERNICE

Informant: Bernice ———. 141st. St. near Lenox Ave.

When I first came to New York from Bermuda, I thought rent-parties were disgraceful. I couldn't understand how any self-respecting person could bear them, but when my husband, who was a Pullman porter, ran off and left me with a sixty-dollar-a-month apartment on my hands and no job, I soon learned, like everyone else, to rent my rooms out an' throw thses Saturday get-togethers.

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I had two roomers, a colored boy and white girl named Leroy and Hazel, who first gave me the idea. They offered to run the parties for me if we'd split fifty-fifty. I had nothing to lose, so that's how we started.

We bought corn liquor by the gallon and sold it for fifty cents a small (cream) pitcher. Leroy also ran a poker and black-jack game in the little bedroom off the kitchen. An' on these two games alone, I've seen him take in as much as twenty-eight dollars in one night. Well, you can see why I didn't want to give it up, once we had started. Especially since I could only make six or seven dollars at the most as weekly part-time worker (domestic).

The games paid us both so well, in fact, that we soon made gambling our specialty. Everybody liked it, and our profit was more 2 that way so our place soon became the hangout of all those party-goers who liked to mix a little gambling with their drinking and dancing.

An' with all these young studs out to find a little mischief, with plenty of cash in their [?] pockets, we soon learned not to leave things to chance. Instead, Hazel and I would go out an' get acquainted with good-looking young fellows that we'd see sitting alone in the back of gin-mills looking as if they had nobody to take them out, but that they also would like a good time. We'd give them our cards and tell them to drop around to the house. Well, wherever there are pretty women you'll soon have a pack of men.

And so, we taught the girls how to wheedle free drinks and food out of the men—and if they got them to spend more than usual, we'd give them a little percentage or a nice little present like a pair of stockings or vanity case or something. Most of the time, though, we didn't have to give them a thing. They were all out looking for a little fun, and when they came to our house they could have it for nothing instead of going to the gin-mills where they'd have to pay for their own drinks.

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And we rented rooms, sometimes overnight and sometimes for just a little while during the party. I have to admit that, at first, I was a little shocked at the utter boldness of it, but Leroy and Hazel seemed to think nothing of it, so I let it go. Besides, it meant extra money—and extra money was what I needed.

I soon took another hint from Hazel and made even more. I used to notice that Leroy would bring some of his friends home with him and, after they'd have a few drinks, leave them alone in the room with Hazel. I wasn't quite sure that what I was thinking was so until Hazel told me herself. It happened one day when an extra man came along there was no one to take care of him. Hazel buzzed to me and asked me if I would do it. I thought about it for awhile, then made up my mind to do it.

Well, that was the last of days-work (domestic work) for me. I figured that I was a fool to go out and break my back scrubbing floors, washing, ironing, and cooking, when I could earn three day's pay, or more, in fifteen minutes. Then I began to understand how Hazel got all those fine dresses and good-looking furs.

From then on, it was strictly a business with me. I decided that if it was as easy as that, it was the life for me.

The landlord's agent had been making sweet speeches to me for a long time and I began to figure out how I could get around paying the rent. Well, I got around it, but that didn't stop me from giving rent parties. Everything I made then was gravy; clean, clear profit for little Bernice. I even broke off with Leroy and Hazel. She began to get jealous and catty, and I think he was holding out on profits from the game. Anyway, we split up and I got an "old man" (sweetheart) of my own to help me run the house. An' when he took things over he even stopped the girls from going into the rooms with the men, unless they were working for us. That is, unless we were getting half of what they made. Still, the men had to pay for the rooms. And I've seen some of those girls who made enough on Saturday night to buy themselves an entirely new outfit for Sunday, including fur coat. They'd catch

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some sucker, like a Pullman porter or longshoreman who had been lucky in a game, and have him jim-clean (completely broke) before the night was over. Naturally, I got my cut.

It was a good racket while it lasted, but it's shot to pieces now.